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ABSTRACT

Professional role performance difficulties experienced by 23 first year itinerant specialists in the field of special education were studied in Illinois public schools (excluding Chicago). An itinerant specialist is a teacher with specialized training in a particular disability who provides services to students on a homebound basis, in a hospital program, or who travels between schools within a district or between school districts. Of the 23 respondents, 14 were speech and language therapists, 3 taught the physically handicapped, 5 taught the hearing impaired, and 1 taught the visually impaired. Data were obtained concerning difficulties unique to the teaching assignment and difficulties associated with seven general professional roles of the teachers. These seven roles are as follows: planner, director and helper of learning, counselor and guide to students, mediator and interpreter of the culture, link with the community, member of the teaching profession, and member of the school community. Greatest difficulties were reported for the activity of writing individual educational programs and for the roles of "teacher as planner" and "teacher as a link with the community." Recommendations include the following: master teachers should supervise preservice students in a role-difficulty practicum; and university professors should include the seven role performance areas in teacher preservice programs. (SEW)

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Professional Role Performance Difficulties
of First Year Itinerant Specialists

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Abstract

Twenty-three first year itinerant specialists in the field of special education provided a rating and ranking of their professional role performance difficulties as part of a larger study of professional difficulties encountered by first year Illinois public school teachers (exclusive of the Chicago Public Schools) during the 1980-81 school year. The findings provide needed feedback useful for university, school district and itinerant specialists concerned with the improvement of professional performance.

Itinerant specialists indicated varying degrees of difficulty in performing seven professional roles of teachers as: a planner; director and helper of learning; counselor and guide to the student; mediator and interpreter of the culture; a link with the community; a member of the teaching profession and as a member of the school community. Greatest difficulties were reported for the activity of writing individual educational programs (IEPs) and for the roles of "teacher as planner" and "teacher as a link with the community".

Professional Role Performance Difficulties of
First Year Itinerant Specialists

Concern for the preparation and performance of public school teachers in America evolved with the development of the nation's common schools. Marsh and Wilder (1954) reviewed studies of teacher effectiveness and conducted between 1902-1952. Since their report several studies in this area have been reported each year. The evolution of the specific concern for the professional difficulties of teachers is documented by Eddins (1930) "Why Teachers Fail"; Spears (1945) "What Disturbs the Beginning Teacher"; and Wey (1951) "Why Do Beginning Teachers Fail". A study reported by Ellis (1961) found student teaching and early professional experience to stand out as being very influential in the development of professionally competent, effective and satisfied teachers.

More recent studies in this area reflect an increased concern for school climate and teaching (Esposito, 1981); "Teacher Burnout: How to Recognize It" (Hendrickson, 1979); "Public Law 94-142 and Stress: A Problem for Educators" (Bensky, Shaw, Grouse, Bates, Dixon, & Beane, 1980); and "Persistent Difficulties of Teacher Evaluation" (Thompson & Ellis, 1981). Numerous articles have appeared in professional journals since 1975 discussing teacher burnout as being caused by several stress factors associated with teaching exceptional children. Weiskoph (1980) enumerated the problems leading to stress and burnout among special education teachers. Some of her suggestions, although they deal primarily with what teachers can do for themselves, do suggest the need for proper role preparation. This suggestion was again reiterated by Kirk (1981) who stressed the need for preparation programs to include more training and experience. Kirk also emphasized the importance of a two-year graduate program and at least three years of

experience before a special education teacher becomes a consultant to teachers in the school system.

Problem

What professional roles and activities do first year itinerant specialists in the field of special education report that they have difficulty performing? Additionally, do these reported difficulties vary from similar reports provided by other first year special education teachers and from first year teachers in seven other areas of school curriculum?

Procedures

The study reported here was part of a larger descriptive study of the teaching difficulties of first year teachers in 1980-1981 who were teaching in the public schools of Illinois (exclusive of the Chicago Public Schools). Specifically, a list of all first year teachers was obtained from the Illinois State Board of Education. From this list of 3,455, a systematic sample of 1,571 was selected. Near the end of the 1980-1981 school year, the instrument of the study, a scale permitting the rating and ranking of professional role and activity difficulties was sent to each teacher in the sample. One hundred and fifty or 46.2 percent of the 325 special education teachers in the sample completed and returned the instrument. Twenty-three of these respondents were identified as itinerant specialists. This group of 23 teachers is the population of the study reported here.

For the purpose of this study, an itinerant specialist was considered to be a teacher who has received specialized training in a particular disability category and who provided services to students on a homebound basis, hospital program, or traveled between schools within a district or between school districts.

Data were obtained from these teachers for two categories of their professional performance: (1) difficulties unique to their teaching assignment, and (2) difficulties associated with seven general professional roles of the teacher (see below).

The instrument of the study was based on the concept of teacher role performance (Kinney, 1952) and a scale developed by Ellis and Radebaugh (1974). For purposes of the study, teacher difficulties were operationally defined as those difficulties which teachers perceived themselves to have in the performance of their professional roles and activities qualitatively ranked according to the level of success satisfactory to them.

In addition to permitting these itinerant specialists to provide an anonymous written indication of difficulties experienced in performing activities as unique to their teaching, they were also permitted to report on difficulties encountered in performing each of seven roles common to public school teachers. These seven roles are briefly described as follows:

Role I. The teacher as planner. Teachers identify and assess the needs and problems of both students and society. They identify, assess and state clearly defensible instructional objectives. They plan and develop appropriate learning materials and activities. They plan to assess and evaluate performance. They communicate and report the progress and needs of students. They plan for all of these activities to take place.

Role II. The teacher as director and helper of learning.

Teachers work to help students learn. They plan, make decisions and take actions. They constantly and reflectively evaluate each activity and occurrence. Their actions involve getting ready for learning, interacting with the students and assessing both students and society.

Role III. The teacher as counselor and guide to the student.

Throughout the entire mediating or teaching process teachers also give behavioral evidence that they believe in the students' potential as persons. Teachers work with students who have unique needs and problems which include a personal, social, emotional, moral, physical and intellectual nature. Teachers demonstrate an awareness of the complexity of the individuality in his totality.

Role IV. The teacher as mediator and interpreter of the culture. Teachers and students belong to a specific culture which necessitates conscious awareness and critical examination. Teachers are responsible in a unique way to clearly and reflectively communicate the culture.

Role V. The teacher as a link with the community.

Teachers and students are a part of a cultural setting and both are involved with the culture through community needs, happenings, interpretations and customs. The very service and art of teaching necessarily link teachers to the community and the community to the teachers. Teachers help translate community values, needs and goals into school programs and communicate school programs to the community.

Role VI. The teacher as a member of the teaching profession. As a member of the teaching profession, teachers advocate and practice professional autonomy including the freedom to teach and to learn. They accept responsibility for their professional judgements, acts and conduct. They continue their professional growth and contribute to the further development of the profession.

Role VII. The teacher as a member of the school community. As a member of the school community teachers relate to and share experiences with students, administrators, supervisors, other teachers and support personnel. They share in the general duties and responsibilities of the school and participate in efforts to improve the quality of programs and life in the school.

Findings

Characteristics of the itinerant specialists

Of the 23 respondents, 14 were speech and language therapists; three were teachers of the physically handicapped; five were teachers of the hearing impaired; and one was a teacher of the visually impaired. Seventy-four percent of the 23 respondents received their certification to teach at levels preschool through sixth grade; 64.3 percent of the respondents taught in rural and suburban areas which were under 50,000 in population; while 82.6 percent of the respondents were females and 17.4 percent were males. All taught in Illinois public schools. It should be noted that a directory of first-year teachers for the 1980-1981 school year was not available for the Chicago Public Schools when the study was begun; thus, the population did not include teachers from that large urban school district.

Results of respondents rating and ranking role performance
difficulties

Respondents of the survey were asked to indicate the degree of difficulty they perceived themselves to have in the performance of seven activities as these were unique to their teaching assignment. Their responses are summarized in Table I.

Insert Table I about here

The data presented in Table I indicates three teaching activities in which over 50 percent of the itinerant specialists were having little or no difficulty. These are: "Working effectively with parents of handicapped children"; "Adapting curriculum materials to handicapped students' needs"; and "Functioning as a member of an interdisciplinary team in programming for a child". Over 50 percent of the respondents reported experiencing some degree of difficulty with the other four listed teaching activities. The most difficulty was reported with the item, "Writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)".

Respondents next were asked to rate the role performance difficulties they were experiencing. In Table II their overall rating for each of the seven roles appears. From these data it would seem that for two of these seven roles more than 50 percent of the first-year itinerant specialists in the study had difficulty. These roles were "The teacher as a planner" and "The teacher as a link with the community". These teachers indicated the least difficulty with the roles "The teacher as a director and helper of learning" and "The teacher as a member of the teaching profession".

Insert Table II about here

The instrument of the study allowed space for additional comments if the respondent so desired. Although the data reflect some degree of difficulty relating to each role, no role is 100 percent free of difficulties and, therefore, the comment section helped to further pinpoint some additional role related problems that respondents were experiencing. Presented below is a synopsis of these comments and specific activity ratings pertaining to each of the seven roles.

The teacher as planner. This role is reported to have given most of the first-year itinerant specialists some degree of difficulty. Specifically, most difficulties reported were in writing formal reports and in not having adequate time to do planning with mainstream teachers due to travel time between schools. Each of the specific activities appearing on the instrument related to this role received a mean response of 12 marks indicating difficulties with the techniques of establishing relevant and clear objectives; assessing and evaluating performance; and writing clear and concise Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

The teacher as director and helper of learning. Once again the itinerant specialists' comments expressed difficulties with the use of their time to do proper evaluations due to their heavy caseload of students and the need for more instruction on how to use behavior control techniques so that their time could be more wisely spent with remediation of disabilities.

The teacher as counselor and guide to the student. The respondents' concerns addressed to this role dealt with the inadequacies of their counseling techniques needed to work with parents and their inability to work as members of multidisciplinary teams.

The teacher as mediator and interpreter of the culture.

Some of the reasons as to why 42.1 percent of the itinerant specialists were having some degree of difficulty with this role were indicated by teacher comments indicating that they had not given it much thought or that they were too busy working on isolated skills to emphasize this role during their instructional time with the student.

The teacher as a link with the community. This role reported to be the most difficult for 63.1 percent of the itinerant specialists. Their comments indicated that this role was not perceived as being important in that they did not see a need for developing an awareness of community values, needs, goals, and problems. Only one respondent expressed the value of using the community for learning experiences and desired to do more to publicize the program to parents, teachers, and organizations within the community.

The teacher as a member of the teaching profession. This role was reported to be the least difficult role for 86.4 percent of the respondents. A great concern was expressed by 34 percent of the respondents regarding their treatment as an equal by their peers. Their relatively young ages and their being first year teachers were reasons perceived by the respondents for their non-acceptance.

The teacher as a member of the school community. Due to a large student caseload and serving more than two schools per day, itinerant specialists generally are not expected to carry out non-instructional responsibilities within a school building. The respondents expressed concerns about this role in that they did not feel a part of any one building and felt some animosity from their peers due to the fact that they were not required to

carry out extra classroom responsibilities at the school such as lunchroom and playground duty.

The final question of the survey asked the respondents to rank the seven role performances in order of difficulty with "1" being the most difficult role and "7" being the least difficult. In Table III the itinerant specialists' role difficulty rankings appear and are compared not only to 150 special education teachers, but also to seven other curricular areas. It is important to note that the itinerant specialists ranked two roles as being their most difficult (teacher as a planner and teacher as mediator and interpreter of the culture). In no other curricular area was teacher as a planner ranked as their most difficult role. Six of the eight curricular areas ranked the role of teacher as a link with the community as number one or two while the itinerant specialists ranked this role number four. The role of teacher as a member of the teaching profession was ranked as the least difficult by teachers in six of the eight curricular areas including the itinerant specialists.

Insert Table III about here

Conclusions

The study's sample of itinerant specialists is small (N=23) however, the data suggest some significant difficulties which need to be addressed by teacher educators at the university level and by school district personnel who are responsible for supervisory, staff development, and inservice preparation programs.

The itinerant specialists have larger caseloads than do those special education teachers with a self-contained classroom which usually have an established teacher-pupil ratio prescribed by state law. The larger caseload presents difficulties regarding (1) effective student evaluation to identify problems; (2) not allowing the specialists enough time to get to know the entire student so as to be able to deal with behavior problems; and (3) the amount of travel time between schools and school districts not allowing the specialists to be a member of a school community and to share in that school community's responsibilities. Furthermore, the ability to be a member of the community so as to relate the community's values and goals to the students may be restricted by the itinerant specialist's assignment.

Public Law 94-142 has been in effect since 1975. This means that universities should have had ample time to evaluate their preparation programs and sophisticate the materials presented to teachers and to the schools they serve. Inservice programs are able to keep teachers abreast of changes in curricular material, instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, and personal growth, but inservice training frequently occurs too late to deal with the skills which are critically needed by the first year teacher (Grant & Zeichner, 1981). The conclusion was reached in an earlier study by Ellis (1961) that student teaching is perhaps the most influential preparation variable in the development of a competent teacher. If we do not heed the words of Weiskopf (1980), we may be adding to the statistics of teachers becoming "burned out" because of improper role preparation. Therefore, much professional role preparation lies in the hands of the university preservice programs.

Those at the university level and those working at grades K-12 in staff development roles in schools may find a basis for much of their efforts in the teacher difficulties this study reports.

Recommendations

The findings and conclusions warrant the following recommendations.

1. The results of this and similar studies should be used by itinerant specialists in the field of special education and by those accountable for facilitating their professional development as an assessment and evaluation upon which to plan for professional improvement.

2. "Master teachers" should supervise preservice students in a role-difficulty based practicum.

3. "Master teachers" should be periodically provided with inservice training to update their responsibilities to practicum students and to make sure that they are emphasizing the seven professional role expectations which will confront the first year itinerant specialist.

4. University professors should include the seven role performances appearing in this study in courses they teach in teacher preparation programs. Instruction should be enhanced with video tapes of actual role situations and master teacher should constantly strive to maintain a realistic and relevant, instead of an idealistic approach to the techniques of working with parents, students, teachers, and persons within a community.

5. A study similar to the one reported here should be conducted at the district level periodically and the results used as a basis for staff development.

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Table I
First Year Illinois Public School Itinerant Specialists' Report of Difficulties Encountered
In Performing Activities Unique To Their Teaching

N-23

Teaching Activities	Degree of Difficulty Reported							
	Little or None		Moderate		Considerable		Extreme	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Writing Individual Educational Programs (IEPs).	7	30.4	15	65.2	1	4.3	0	0
Working effectively with parents of handicapped children.	14	60.9	7	30.4	2	8.7	0	0
Working successfully with "regular" teachers.	11	47.8	9	39.1	3	13.0	0	0
Adapting curriculum materials to handicapped students' needs.	13	56.5	6	26.1	3	13.0	1	4.3
Identifying and interacting with community resources.	8	34.8	10	43.5	5	21.7	0	0
Applying various types of reinforcement schedules in order to modify behavior.	9	39.1	12	52.2	2	8.7	0	0
Functioning as a member of an interdisciplinary team in programming for a child.	13	56.5	9	39.1	1	4.3	0	0

Table II
First Year Illinois Public School Itinerant Specialists Ratings of Their
Professional Role Performance Difficulties

N-23

Teacher Professional Roles	Role Performance Difficulty Rating							
	Little or None		Moderate		Considerable		Extreme	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
The teacher as planner:	10	43.5	13	56.5	0	0	0	0
The teacher as director and helper of learning.	19	82.6	4	17.4	0	0	0	0
The teacher as counselor and guide to the students.	14	66.7	7	33.3	0	0	0	0
The teacher as a mediator and interpreter of the culture.	11	57.9	7	36.8	1	5.3	0	0
The teacher as a link with the community	7	36.8	10	52.6	2	10.5	0	0
The teacher as a member of the teaching profession.	19	86.4	2	9.1	1	4.5	0	0
The teacher as a member of the school community.	17	73.9	6	26.1	0	0	0	0

Table III

Professional Role Performance Difficulties As Ranked By First Year Illinois
Public School Teachers From Eight Curricular Areas

Teacher Roles	Itinerant (N=23)	Special Ed. (N=150)	Home Ec. (N=38)	Phys. Ed. (N=32)	Art (N=34)	Social Studies (N=13)	Math (N=31)	Science (N=47)	English (N=49)
The teacher as planner.	1	4	4	4	6	3	5	3	4
The teacher as director and helper of learning	6	6	5	5	4	1	4	4	2
The teacher as counselor and guide to the student.	3	3	3	3	2	5	3	5	5
The teacher as a mediator and interpreter of the culture.	1	1	1	2	3	2	2	2	1
The teacher as a link with the community.	4	2	2	1	1	4	1	1	3
The teacher as a member of the teaching profession.	7	7	7	6	7	6	7	7	6
The teacher as a member of the school community.	5	5	6	7	5	7	6	6	7